DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 264 CE 066 888

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TITLE No Big Mystery in Building a Coalition! AACE Bonus Brief.
INSTITUTION American Association for Career Education, Hermosa Beach, CA.
PUB DATE Aug 94
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Women's American Organization for Rehabilitation through Training Advocacy-for-Education Seminar (Washington, DC, June 13-14, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Journal Articles (080) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
JOURNAL CIT Careers Update; v7 n3 insert Aug 1994

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advocacy; *Career Education; Citizen Participation; *County Programs; Elementary Secondary Education; Guidelines; *Partnerships in Education; *Program Development
IDENTIFIERS *Arlington Public Schools VA; *Coalitions

ABSTRACT

This document describes the 11-year history of the formation of the Arlington County Coalition for Career Education, which was conceived to help achieve the infusion of sequential career education (CE) activities into the K-12 curriculum in Arlington, Virginia. The rationale for forming a coalition, rationale for infusing CE into the elementary-secondary curriculum, and process of finding a sponsor and establishing a coalition advisory committee are discussed. Described next are the various resources tapped by the coalition builders, including the remnants of the school-board-appointed CE coordinating committee and the pool of participants in a miniconference on CE. The following are among the 11 coalition activities outlined in a discussion of the successes achieved by the coalition: a survey to determine the extent of CE in local schools; campaigns to support national CE legislation, obtain funding for a part-time CE coordinator and career resource centers, and achieve passage of state legislation to fund career awareness and guidance activities; testimony before state and local bodies on numerous issues related to CE; and development of a two-part cable television program on transitional skills. (MN)

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American Association For Career Education

AACE Bonus Brief

No Big Mystery in Building a Coalition!

Polly Liss

Good evening, present and future advocates! It's not always easy to find colleagues in advocacy, but I feel at home in this group. I hope you are feeling comfortable with the word ADVOCATE—or as I've come to think of it—ORTist with a cause!

To begin, I want to mention that my mother had a lovely singing voice. That's the good news! The bad news is that I didn't inherit it. If I had, I would sing: "I walk alone . . . and, to tell you the truth . . . I am lonely!" These altered lyrics were my theme song before I started the Arlington County Coalition for Career Education in 1978. It's hard for me to believe even as I say it—that was almost 15 years ago—and it's still going strong (Liss, 1991)!

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A Coalition--Why?

Now, why would I have wanted to start a coalition in the first place? Very simply, because I had a point to make, and no matter how many phone calls I made or letters I wrote or speeches I gave, I was doing it in my name and alone. It was like whistling in the dark. You know you're whistling, but does anyone else?

I was supporting an education concept that I began to realize even many educators did not readily relate to. In fact, many confused it with vocational education and took for granted it was already being done. But, there were others who did understand that career education, as far as public education was concerned, was a K-12 concept, and it could not be equated with vocational education. They knew vocational education can exist without career education, and that career education cannot exist without vocational education.

Once you find out you are not alone in your thinking, you begin to communicate with those who share your convictions—to share your knowledge, your concerns, your hopes.

A Cause

If you feel you have a cause worth championing, you bring together those of a like mind and formalize your efforts. You and your like-minded colleagues look for all the support you can get.

In my case it was easy. I had learned about career education through experiences

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Presentation at the Women's American Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT) Advocacy-for-Education Seminar, Washington, DC, June 13-14, 1993.

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provided for me by Women's American ORT. Through the knowledge gained, I began to look more closely at the education my children were receiving in the public schools and wanted desperately for it to change before it was too late for my children to benefit from a more realistic preparation for life beyond high school graduation. I asked my ORT chapter to sponsor a coalition for career education. They readily agreed to do so.

Beginnings

With a sponsor, other necessary ingredients for a coalition began to fall in place. I could then go to prominent, and not-so-prominent-but-dedicated, educators, business people, parents, union members—anyone that I, and increasingly others, thought could see the merit of the infusion of sequential career education activities into the K-12 curriculum. We found more and more people who wanted education to change to produce better prepared students who would want to stay in school and who would learn how to be contributing, productive citizens in any community in which they would live, and who would know that education is ongoing.

Webster says a coalition is "a temporary alliance of distinct parties, persons, or states for joint action." Differing from an appointed advisory committee, a coalition is attached to no other body and has no guidelines of operation set for it by others. It is an independent body which can be convened by any group or individual, and which determines its own goals and modus operandi.

However, don't reinvent the wheel! You may already have in your community seeds sown by others who have prepared fertile ground for you to reap a coalesced harvest. I found just such a situation in Arlington.

Resources

There had been a school board-appointed career education coordinating committee. It had ceased to function, but those who had been a vital part of that committee were still around. The school administrator who had been the system liaison to the committee was very happy to talk with me and to learn that I wanted to establish a coalition to work on behalf of career education. He provided me with names of educators and community people to invite to join the coalition. He provided space to meet and even had printing done and stood the mailing expenses for large events. He participated regularly himself.

Prior to approaching him, earlier in 1978, I was one of 15 women selected by Women's American ORT to attend a mini-conference on career education, at the invitation of Ken Hoyt, then director of the Office of Career Education in the then-U.S. Office of Education. For two days, the 15 of us and Ken Hoyt and his assistant talked about what career education is and what activities we engaged in in our communities to promote or implement the concept. I heard one of my sister members talk about a coalition for career education that ORT had organized in Dade County, Florida. She said the members represented 15,000 people in business, in community-based organizations, in labor, in education—all collaborating to infuse the career education concept into the school curriculum and to keep it flourishing and growing.

Ken Hoyt held numerous mini-conferences, but for that series, he had selected 15

different community-based organizations—Women's American ORT, the Chamber of Commerce, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, National Alliance for Business, and 10 others. These organizations were my first targets to invite to join the coalition—and most of them did!

In an earlier paper (Liss, 1986), I spelled out how I formed the coalition. In ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center, U.S. Department of Education), there is another paper (Liss, 1980) with more specific details.

Successes

As many of you have found out, changes in education proceed very slowly, and they have to be pushed all along the way. The average education change takes five years. Talk about patience--the coalition pushed for 11 years before we could at last say we had achieved our ultimate objective: The Arlington school budget has a line item for a full-time K-12 career education coordinator!

Of course, there were many smaller successes along the way:

1. We surveyed the schools for information regarding the extent to which the concept of career education was implemented and the needs of each school to improve its program and to receive help from the community. The results were communicated to the school board. The schools had a very long way to go.

2. We arranged for a course for credit to be given by the University of Virginia on how to implement the concept—with tuition for participating Arlington educators paid by the Arlington schools.

3. We supported national career education legislation.

4. We successfully urged the school board to apply for funding from the now-defunct Career Education Incentive Act for a part-time career education coordinator and for career resource centers. The funding was received and used accordingly.

5. With a $1,000 gift from a local business, we ran a well-publicized luncheon for 100 "movers and shakers" in the Arlington community to tell them about career education.

6. We spoke out on the need for a state coordinator for career education each time an incumbent left that position and also for the position of a local coordinator to be written into our county school budget when federal and state funding disappeared. That's the critical moment when many programs die. We were successful on both counts.

7. We testified before state and local bodies on numerous issues directly and indirectly related to career education.

8. We developed a two-part program on transitional skills for cable television.

9. We endorsed Virginia Senate Joint Resolution Number 66 on elementary guidance and counseling programs, saying: "As advocates of the concept of career education, in which the role of the guidance counselor is indispensable, we see education as a lifelong right and need. The late intervention of counselors diminishes the possibility of helping each child in career education's sequential objectives, K-12, of self-awareness, career awareness, career exploration, and career decision making. It is unfair to the student to expect all of this to occur spontaneously at the secondary level.

10. We endorsed and commented on the forward-looking but controversial report of the Arlington Task Force on Guidance Services—opposed by the "far right."

11. We are invited annually to sit with other invited honored guests each "All-Staff Day" before school opens officially, when staff attendance is mandatory.

12. We delight in the knowledge, also, that as a result of our activities, career education is securely written into the Arlington school system's six-year plan.

The coalition is well-known and respected. Several years ago when we felt that at last we had accomplished our purposes—that the career education coordinator's position was a line item in the budget; that the coordinator was actually in place to insure that career education would become an integral part of all curriculum areas, K-12; that all of the other favorable factors were achieved—we thought we would dissolve as an organization.

However, that was not to be. At the request of the superintendent, we continue to exist to champion career education. We have just sponsored another successful teleconference in the secondary schools—this time on computer careers. We have focused on increasing membership from the greater community. The school board that was initially almost unapproachable has members who attend our meetings. Imagine my delight and surprise when I recently picked up a brochure on the school board and its members and found in the biography of one: "She has been an Arlington resident since 1980. She owned her own business for five years and is a member of the Arlington Chamber of Commerce and the Arlington County Coalition for Career Education."

Futures

Yes, indeed. There are many rewards along the way. The story of career education, the story of EDUCATION is still being written. It is being written by people like you and me—the "crusaders," as Ken Hoyt calls us, who won't let valid issues die. Because of our efforts, our young people will have the best chances possible for success and fulfillment in their future lives. We are going to be depending on them—they are our businesspeople of tomorrow, our educators, trade and service personnel, doctors, legislators, community leaders, our future volunteers!

Know your issue. Network. Organize. Form your coalition. Publicize! Plan collaboratively. Publicize! Take your case to where it counts. Publicize!

You can do anything you want to do—but you'll be much more effective when you "pluralize" yourselves and speak with a collective voice.

I look forward to hearing about your coalitions!

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Polly Liss is the founder and past president of the Arlington County, Virginia, Coalition for Career Education. She is the treasurer of the American Association for Career Education; a member of the Virginia State Career Education Advisory Committee; and a member of the Arlington County Adult, Vocational, and Career Education Advisory Committee.

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